BEN GUNN

Text by Paul Muldoon
Music by Scott Wheeler

1. ALL AT SEA

I was born and bred in Fermanagh
On the shores of Lough Erne
By six I was an orphan
There was nowhere I could turn
I was taken in by my uncle
The poet Cathal Bui
He spoke to me as Gaeilge
I learned Irish at his knee
Till I was eleven years of age
From there I went to Sligo
and the Sligo quay
The future had seemed unclouded
Till I shook from stem to stern
Wave upon wave had flown into a rage
And I found myself at sea
I found myself all at sea

I set sail on the Walrus
With Jack Flint at the helm
Hallions all... hellraisers
Disturbing the peace of the realm
When I left Bristol harbor
In 1743
I paid no more heed to Silver’s limp
Than any amputee
From Blackbeard to Barbarossa
For tearing men limb from limb
Was meat and drink to me
To give up riproaring to give up robbery
Would have left me overwhelmed
Would have left me at a loss
Would have left me all at sea

With the Welshman Pew who lost his sight
When a cannon burst its breech
And whom I’d promised to lead right
To the treasure buried on the beach
When I failed to deliver the chest of gold
I was first tortured by Israel Hands
Then thrown in chains in the hold
Then set down on a foggy spit of sand
Where it seemed I was destined
To end my days with McPhee and Preston

I never took the time to mourn
Those who live on despite a fatal wound
Or think how many a mariner
Must find himself marooned
Till I woke in that miasma
with Preston and McPhee
Jack Silver had stabbed my messmates
During a drunken spree
Preston was blood-bearded blood-quiffed
And when McPhee went junglewards
I was left without company
Though I stood there on firm shingle
I slowly became attuned
To the fact I had been cast adrift
To the fact I was at sea
The fact I was all at sea
2. GOAT DANCE

One year I spent trying to creep
Up on the goats while they were asleep
In the little copse I called Madrid
It was the spot
Where they held court
And had something akin to sport
A shegoat and her little Captain Kidd
Were dancing a gavotte
When the shegoat gave a leap
With a huppity-huppity-hup
For she knew the jig was up

One year I spent finecombing a cap
Of goatskin so the nap
Would throw off the rain
As befits an old salt
The fact that my coat
Had been worn by a billy goat
Meant he hadn't died in vain
As he waltzed
Into my pitfall trap
With a huppity-huppity-hup
When he knew the jig was up

One year I spent counting the vast
Treasure Flint had amassed
And buried on Spy
Glass Hill
Till that fateful day
The tenth of May
Three goats and I
Were dancing a quadrille
When we heard a ship's cannon blast
With a huppity-huppity-hup
And we knew the jig was up
3. GOT AWAY FROM ME

Once I prayed to god
For a taste of salt cod
Or cheddar cheese
A pickled plum
A nip of rum
A biscuit crumb
The bird I hoped to snare
Took to the air
From the palm tree
It got away from me
It got away
It got away from me

From their sandbar
My fellow tars
Had made mournful pleas
I heard them beg
For a powder keg
From Jack the Peg
I was about to make a point
About the artificial joint
And piracy
It got away from me
It got away
It got away from me
When I came back to England
After years of godlessness
I tried to disentangle
Myself from that unholy mess
I gave up the sea surge
For the love of Margaret Bundy
I gave up Captain Teach
For the school Meg taught on Sundays

When I came back to England
After years of being rudderless
I tried to disentangle
Myself from my sculdudderies
I gave up compass for compassion
A twist of tobacco for whist
I gave up the Navy ration
For a nave lying at a list
I gave up Blind Pew for a pew in church
Salt cod for the psalter
Even marriage seemed within reach
Till Meg left me at the altar
She got away from me
Get away she said
You get away from me

She must have seen I’d lost faith
In coming alongside her staithe
And mooring in her lee
In lying in her sheltered cove
Never more to rove
In search of treasure trove
The possibility I once divined
Of Ben Gunn becoming refined
The possibility of feeling benign
Towards Silver and his kind
And grace one day being mine

Had tugged on my line
Then suddenly broke free
It got away from me
It got away
It got away from me

That's why I'm heaving to
That's why I'm going to fetch
That goatskin parasol
From my old sea chest

I'll put together a crew
And set out afresh
For the coast of Hy-Brasil
The Islands of the Blest